

## **16th Annual Conference of the European Association for the Study of Religions EASR 2018 “Multiple Religious Identities”. University of Bern, 17–21 June 2018**

**Joanna MALITA-KRÓL**

The European Association for the Study of Religion was established during an inaugural meeting on 2 May 2000 in Krakow, Poland. Henceforth, its objective has been to promote the academic study of religions through the international collaboration of scholars normally resident in Europe and whose research is connected to the subject of religion. The 16th annual conference of the European Association for the Study of Religion, combined with the Regional Conference of the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR) took place in Switzerland, in the lovely city of Bern, at the Institut für Religionswissenschaft of the Universität Bern (University of Bern). This year's main theme focused on multiple religious identities. As noted by the current President of EASR professor Einar Thomassen in the official conference programme, in the age of multiculturalism the questions raised by confronting the terms “religion”, “identity” and “multiplicity” have universal importance in the history of religions. Thus, the notion of multiple religious belonging, religious identity and conversion studies were present among the academic analysis. The sheer scale of the conference was undoubtedly impressive: in total, there were 6 keynote lectures, 158 sessions and 501 papers in the final programme. At the final count, 515 presenters arrived at the conference, representing universities from all over the world – although the majority came from Europe (379 scholars from 24 countries), there were also speakers from Asia (44, from 13 countries), the Americas (23, from 3 countries), Australia/Oceania (7, from 2 countries) and Africa (1 person).

The conference started on Sunday, 17 June with an official Opening Event at the von Roll lecture hall. After registering at the conference, enjoying a

nice cup of coffee and greeting some long-time-no-see colleagues, we all proceeded to the lecture hall for the opening lecture. At first, we were welcomed by Professor Jens Schlieter, President of the SGR-SSSR and this year's conference director. The university authorities were present as well: Professor Christian Leumann, President of the University of Bern, spoke of the university's history and the importance of obtaining cultural knowledge – to which, he hoped, the EASR annual meeting would contribute thoroughly. Professor Stefan Rebenich, Dean of the Faculty of Humanities, expressed his admiration of the abundance and diversity of the proposed papers and underlined how important it is to study identity in our modern world. The previously mentioned President of EASR, Professor Einar Thomassen, proudly called the EASR conference “a place to be” and reminded that the idea of religious identity is an idea of late antiquity – yet at that time it was hard to perceive multiple identity, because “identity” meant “loyalty”. The final welcome speech was delivered by Professor Tim Jensen, President of the IAHR and one of the founding members of EASR. He wondered what “Europe” means in the context of a “European” association and recalled the beginnings of the study of religions – Religionswissenschaft – in Switzerland. The second part of the Opening Event was dedicated to the first keynote lecture: Professor Reinhard Schulze from the University of Bern presented a lecture entitled “The ambiguity of the religious self in pre- and post-national social worlds. Examples from 17th-century Morocco and 20th-century Germany”. He spoke of religion and nation as two parts of religious identity and stressed that in pre-modern times, individuality was expressed by names and telling stories (not *being*, but *becoming* an individual). It was only in the 19th century that the meaning of the term “identity” began to shift and stopped being based solely on the institution of repetition (based on rituals from previous eras). After the first keynote lecture, a welcome reception was held in the von Roll hall, providing more opportunities to meet, greet and engage in interesting conversations.

Most of the subsequent days of the conference followed the same pattern: parallel sessions in the morning (as many as fifteen sessions happening at the same time!), followed by a keynote lecture and more sessions and a lecture after lunch. On Monday, 18 June, the first keynote lecture of the day was delivered by Grace Davie from the University of Exeter (United Kingdom), one of the leading specialists in the sociology of religion. Her speech, entitled “Multiple Religious Identities: Realities and Reflections”, was based



mainly on work undertaken as part of the International Panel on Social Progress – a wide-ranging project covering economic, political and cultural issues. Professor Davie started from reminding the audience that some 80% of the world’s population confess some form of religious identification – and this proportion is growing rather than declining (which is obvious for religious scholars, but not necessarily for sociologists in a general sense). She also emphasized that the significance of the context within which every study is conducted cannot be underestimated. The second keynote lecture that day, a little later in the afternoon, was presented by Professor Milda Ališauskienė from Vytautas Magnus University in Kaunas (Lithuania) and entitled “Diversification of Religious Identities in Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe: the case of the Baltic States”. Professor Ališauskienė explored the role of religion in contemporary societies, especially those which had been a part of the USSR and had to deal with forced secularisation. She showed religion in previously Communist countries on macro-, meso- and micro-levels, presenting Lithuania as Catholic in majority and Latvia and Estonia as religiously mixed. She also underlined that religion is only one source of identity, along with gender, ethnicity etc. Monday’s conference deliberations finished with a Women Scholars Network meeting.

On Tuesday 19 June, after the morning parallel sessions, there was another keynote lecture, entitled “Urbanity and multiple religious identities in antiquity” and delivered by Professor Jörg Rüpke from University of Erfurt, who explored three meanings of religious identities: personal identities (not necessarily identical with communities), collective identities (groups) and the external aspiration of belonging to somebody. It is worth noticing that on Tuesday afternoon, conference participants had an opportunity to enjoy some activities that were not overly academic: firstly, two trips were organised. One involved a tour of the Old Town of Bern, and the other provided a visit to *the Haus der Religionen*, the House of Religions, a community of followers of eight religions who live, worship, and converse under one roof (I attended the latter; it was excellent). Those who did not wish to take part in a trip could watch the World Cup matches (let us put a veil on the Polish national team’s performance against Senegal...). In the evening, there was a barbecue and a dancing event for the most indestructible participants.

Two more keynote lectures were planned for the conference. Professor Dorothea Weltecke spoke on Wednesday morning (20 June), with a talk entitled “Religious demarcation, border violation and deviance discourses in



medieval religious groups”, proving that Abrahamic faiths lived in an integrated community during the Middle Ages – which did not necessarily mean “peaceful”. Fluidity and multiple relations, she said, was a normal reality, although under some circumstances it was tolerated better than others. The last keynote lecture, by Eugen Ciurtin from the Romanian Academy was delivered on Tuesday, 21 June, entitled “A Comparative History of saṃsāra in Early India: In and Out the Vortex of Transmigration” and touched upon the doctrine of saṃsāra as an inscrutable realm of transmigration in Indic religions, along with the concept of karman and rebirth.

During such a large and diverse conference it is simply impossible to take part in every single session one would like to (apart from the keynote lectures described above), especially when three interesting papers are delivered at the very same time. I myself decided to listen to panels dedicated to conversion – my own paper, entitled “*Coming home* metaphor in the narrations of Polish Traditional Wiccans”, was part of the “Conversion and the handling of converts I” session on Monday morning – as well as contemporary Pagan studies, New Age and Western Esotericism-related themes. I found some sessions particularly interesting, above all those already proposed as a coherent panel. Two such projects are worth mentioning – the first one would be the “Negotiations of Religious and Secular Gender Scripts in Women’s Conversions in Contemporary Western Europe” session from Tuesday morning, which was based on a much broader and fascinating project entitled “Beyond Religion versus Emancipation. Gender and Sexuality in Women’s Conversion to Judaism, Christianity and Islam in Contemporary Western Europe”. Four scholars from Utrecht University took part in that session, namely Anne-Marie Korte (the chair), Lieke Lotte Schrijvers, Mariecke van den Berg and Nella van den Brandt (three panellists). They delivered some fascinating case studies regarding women’s conversion and conversion narratives, including analyses of autobiographies and documentaries on conversion to Islam. The second session, also proposed as a coherent whole, was called “Indigenising movements in Europe” and took place in two parts on Wednesday. All the papers dealt with the question “what does it mean to be indigenous?”, departing from the article “Migrating Bodies, Circulating Signs: Brazilian Candomblé, the Garifuna of the Caribbean, and the Category of Indigenous Religions” by Paul Christopher Johnson<sup>1</sup>. I attended the first part of the session and listened to all four papers. Firstly, Suzanne Owen (Leeds Trinity Uni-

<sup>1</sup> See: “History of Religions” Vol. 41, No. 4, pp. 301–327.



versity, United Kingdom) presented the paper “Is Druidry Indigenous? The Politics of Pagan Indigeneity Discourse”. Secondly, Jenny Butler (University College Cork, Ireland) spoke of Paganism in Ireland (paper “Entering the Magic Mists: Irish Contemporary Paganism, Celticity and Indigeneity”) followed by the session’s chair, Graham Harvey (The Open University, United Kingdom) who delivered a paper about an animistic spirituality group called “the Bear Tribe” (“Bear Feasts in a land without (wild) bears: experiments in creating animist rituals”). The last to speak in this panel was Angela Puca (Leeds Trinity University, United Kingdom) who transferred the listeners to contemporary Italy (paper: “‘Witch’ and ‘shaman’: discourse analysis of the use of indigenizing terms in Italy”).

One more session should be mentioned in such a report – one of the very last ones, a sort of summary of the whole conference: “Varieties of Multiple Religious Identities – a summing-up conversation” from Thursday afternoon. Exactly as the title suggested, it was an overall résumé of the conference theme. At first, Christoph Uehlinger (University of Zurich, Switzerland) presented a paper entitled “Researching multiple religious identities past and present: remarks on theory and gleanings from the conference”, in which he outlined three motivations for attending the conference: firstly, to address the current conference issues, secondly, to take part in a seminar meeting on special issues, year after year, and thirdly, to present something regardless of the theme. After this speech, a few responses were delivered: by Jens Schlieter (University of Bern, Switzerland), who recalled how fluent the construction of identity is. Christoph Uehlinger observed that a conference such as this provides a current image of what our discipline stands on. Dorothea Weltecke (University of Frankfurt, Germany) gave some general remarks and a prototype of the multiple identity of her own student. Finally, Linda Woodhead (Lancaster University, United Kingdom) brought up some sociological approaches to religion and mentioned the development of interfaith dialogue. The last speaker in the panel was Anna Sun (Kenyon College, United States of America) with an exceptionally interesting paper entitled “The Puzzles of Religious Identity in Contemporary China”. With this panel brought to a conclusion, we all headed to the Closing Event, which was rather short compared to the opening. In some brief, yet cordial, words Professor Jens Schlieter expressed his gratitude towards the whole organizing committee (well-deserved in my opinion!), followed by Giovanni Casadio (University of Salerno, Italy) who read a few words from the President of the EASR.



All in all, the conference was exceptionally well-organized (a logistical marvel to behold with so many participants!) and represented a unique chance to meet scholars from all over Europe – I must admit it is a delightful experience to actually see in person academics whom I had just quoted in my own paper. I learned a lot, met wonderful people and I am looking forward to the upcoming EASR conferences – the next one will take place in June 2019, in Estonia, in Tartu, with the theme “Religion – Continuations and Disruptions”.

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**EASR 2018 Programme Committee:** Jens Schlieter (conference director, University of Bern), Martin Baumann (University of Lucerne), Philippe Bornet (University of Lausanne), Anja Kirsch (University of Basel), Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz (University of Bern), Andrea Rota (University of Bern), Christoph Uehlinger (University of Zurich), Helmut Zander (University of Fribourg).

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